

Is this guy CRAZY or just

■ By Jim Carroll

A lot of people might think I'm nuts for having twenty-five – that's right, 25! – computers in my house, but I say to them, just wait and see. I figure I'm living five to ten years in the future. Eventually the rest of the world will catch up!

How does a normal chartered accountant, married to another normal chartered accountant, go from a normal, corporate life to life in the "wired castle" I call home today? Easy. I got sick of traffic, long boring meetings, and office politics, and

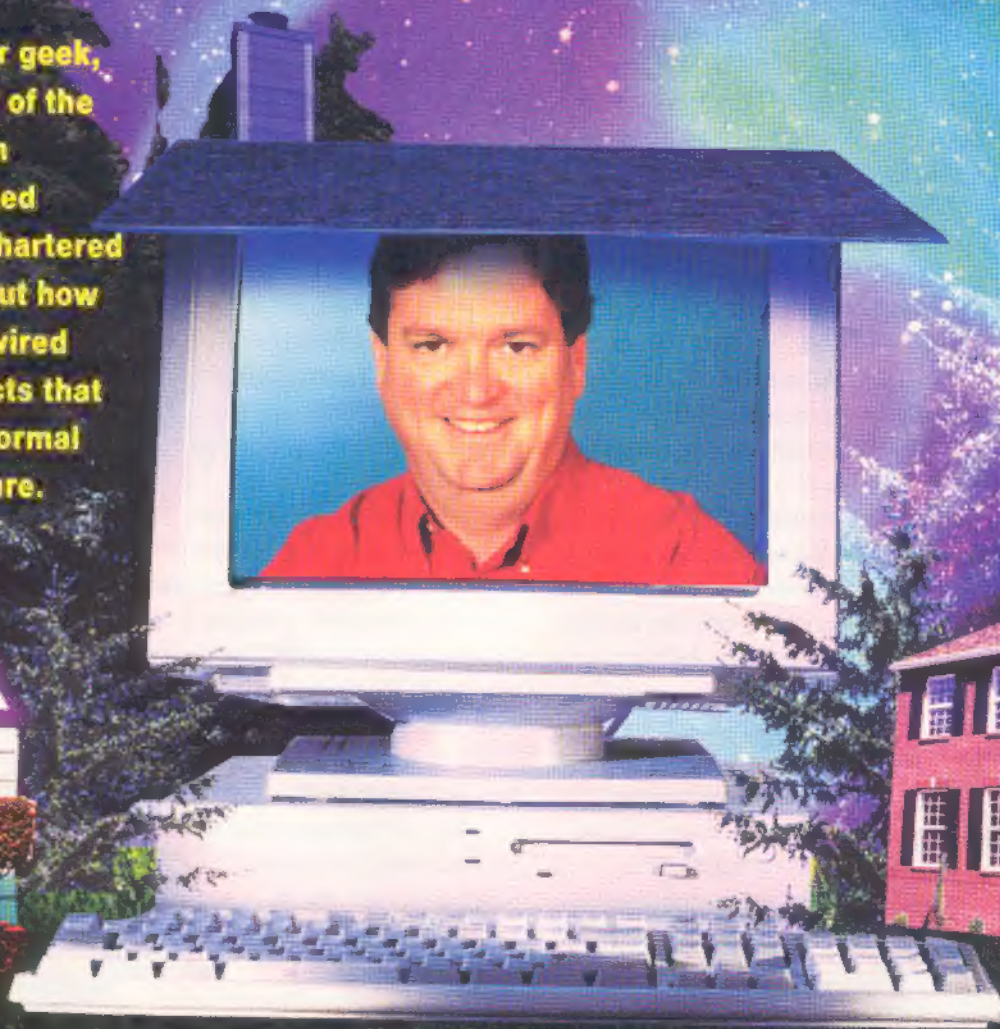
decided to start my own consulting business. Now my morning "commute" is from upstairs to downstairs, the only interruption a quick trip to the kitchen to turn on the coffee maker or, in the summertime, a cool dip in the pool.

Because today I'm a "nomadic worker." I don't have a job, don't want a job, and work real hard not to have to get a job. Instead, I hire myself out to an ever increasing number of companies worldwide, servicing them from my little "electronic cottage."

Except, of course, when I have to hop a plane to go and give a speech. (I'm typing this in an airport lounge, waiting for a flight to Costa Rica, where I am to do a seminar about e-commerce for local business executives.)

And this is why I predict that my home will be the norm for many people in the future. More and more organizations will become more reliant on "knowledge workers" who can service them from afar. More and more of us will chuck the standard

Well known computer geek, internet guru, author of the best selling Canadian Internet Handbook, Led Zeppelin lover, and chartered accountant talks about how he ended up in his "wired castle" ... and predicts that it's nothing but the normal home of the near future.



way ahead of his time?

corporate model, and do our own thing from our home offices.

I hear music, everywhere!

But not all of the computers in my home support my work activities. I'm also a music nut and own more than 1,200 CD's. Years ago, I converted all those CD's to MP3 format, so that I could access all those tunes from any computer in the house. (Note: all those MP3s were bought and paid for; I've bought Led Zeppelin II on 8-Track, LP, Cassette, and CD, and I'll be damned if I'm going to give the record companies one more dime for this album.)

Any computer in my home, including all the desktops, (mine, my wife's, my two sons', the one in the kitchen and the one in the basement family room) can play all that music. Or my kids can load up WinAmp on their PC and pull the tunes through the home network. (My 8-year-old saw a CD at a friend's house, and told

him it was "from the olden days.")

Or best of all, I can listen through the Audiotron! The what? The Audiotron, a fascinating new consumer appliance that looks like a stereo, but is actually a computer, with an optical jack that links to my stereo in the living room, a power plug, and an Ethernet jack. Plug it in and it automatically finds all 15,000 songs on my server farm, and organizes them according to various pre-assigned categories. I can control the AudioTron remotely, manually, or through the Web. And this latter fact has given new life to my old 486-based IBM Thinkpad. Most people would toss out such a machine, but not me! On summer days I place it in the garden shed. Through its wireless LAN card, I pull up a Web browser, access my AudioTron, and change tunes! If a neighbor happens to complain that I'm playing too many old Jim Croce songs on the backyard speakers, I

can instantly pull up Jimi Hendrix or something more exciting!

Doesn't everyone have a "server farm" in the basement?

The "server farm" in the basement is where most of my systems are, (right next to my exercise bike; I surf while I cycle). There's a variety of computers here, all used Pentium 166's, with about 200GB, or 15,000 songs, worth of disk storage. The server farm also has a mail-server, and two other computers that support my access to broadband Internet. One provides a link to my main cable modem connection, the other supports my DSL connection. (Most families choose one high-speed Internet connection or the other, but because the Internet is my "job" I need the redundancy of the two connections.) There are also a couple of old 486 computers that are sometimes used for automatic daily backups.



All of the systems in my server farm run Linux. (I mostly use Linux Mandrake; it has a really cool installation process.) Frankly, I've spent a lot of time learning Linux over the years, since I realized that I could save ten thousand dollars or more going this route. How? Because I don't have to buy an expensive NT server licence from those other guys, nor do I need to buy a client licence for the various Windows systems throughout my house. Not to mention that I have found Linux to be rock-solid stable. Most of my Linux servers have been up for 200 days or more – they simply don't crash. And over the last few years, installation has become quite straightforward. I often say, if I can do it, anyone can.

More, More, More

Other machines? Well, there's my old Apple 5300C, an ancient beast that I now use mostly to capture Mac-format screen shots for various books. And there's my Creative Labs Nomad Jukebox. It really is a computer, though some might not classify it as such. It features a Cirrus "EP7312" chip, which is a microprocessor specifically designed for the development of consumer appliances, and a Fujitsu 9.5mm laptop hard drive, so in my book, it's a computer. It just doesn't look like one.

And I've got a Visor Handspring (mine) and a Palm.Pilot (my wife's – since it's older!).

Supporting all this computing is my local area network. I have strung category-5 twisted pair to each and every room in the house, connected by three hubs running at 10Mbps. I'm hoping to upgrade to 100Mbps within the next year.

Wireless in Toronto

A few years ago we got around to redoing our kitchen. Always looking to the future, I made sure that my new kitchen had eight ethernet drops, because you can never be too prepared. Then what happens? Just two weeks after crimping all those connections I got my hands on a wireless LAN system. Where's the justice?

But what a joy wireless is! I just carry my laptop around, from a big comfy chair inside, out to the deck in summertime (yes, there's a category-5 drop on the deck, too.) back in to a couch in the living room, and work where I please. (Note to hackers – yes, I know all about the security risks of wireless LANs, have written a few articles about it, and have closed myself off to a sufficient degree. Any attempts to get in with a drive-by won't work.)

The wireless LAN also serves another useful purpose. Being the neighbourhood Mr. Fixit, I get a lot of calls whenever someone has a problem with a computer. I work cheap – the promise of a cold beer is usually enough to convince me.

Nowadays, I just grab my laptop, head on over, and instantly pull any needed driver files or software patches "out of the air."

I also do my own digital video editing. As a frequent keynote speaker, I needed a promotional video to show to organizations before they book me. One video producer quoted me \$10,000 to do one. That's when I decided to learn how to do it on my own! Now my home office desktop features almost 600 gigabytes of storage, with a lot of different video projects on the go. All together I have well over a terabyte (about a trillion bytes) of storage here.

Is my home situation insane?

I don't think so – in fact, I'm convinced that one of the major trends we will see play out through the next five years is a massive penetration of home networking technology throughout the home to support new working models. It is also being driven by the need to share Internet connectivity amongst mom, dad, sister and brother. And with that connectivity comes a market for fascinating new MP3 appliances like the AudioTron, and eventually, similar video distribution devices and an entertainment hub. Ten years out, I think my situation will be the norm, not the exception.

